The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
Transcribed by [Name]

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [ ] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

Jim Snowbarger, 57, Marshalltown, Iowa
Louise Duvall
Fisher Control, now known as Emerson Process Management, Emerson Innovation Center
October 29, 2010, 1:30 p.m.

Louise Duvall: To describe our relationship, I need to point out that I haven't seen or talked to Jim in over 30 years, but we shared an office when Jim worked at the Iowa

Commission for the Blind in the late 1970s. We were both Rehabilitation Teachers at the time. This interview is part of the Iowa Department for the Blind's History of Blindness in Iowa, Oral History Project. Jim, do we have your permission to record this interview?

Jim Snowbarger: Certainly, proceed.

Duvall: All right. Let's start with a little background information. When did you become blind?

Snowbarger: I would say, by the age of two I was blind. I was not born blind, but the first couple of years I developed Glaucoma and was pretty much totally blind by somewhere in the two to three-age range.

Duvall: So you don't remember much about vision.

Snowbarger: Not much; only vague impressions, but not much.

Duvall: Ok. Were there any other members of your family that were blind?

Snowbarger: Nope.

Duvall: So you were one of a kind.

Snowbarger: Yep, yep.

Duvall: How did your family deal with a blind child and the special needs that a blind child would have?

Snowbarger: (Laughter) They were the best. Mostly because they didn't acknowledge any special needs at all. They treated me like a regular kid. In fact, I didn't even know that I was different till probably four or maybe five, when they dragged me off to the school for the blind. My parents never told me, "You never have to be realistic and not do that, you're going to hurt yourself." They just said, "You know more about this than we do and for us to impose our limitations based on what we think we know about it would b unfair. It's up to you to discover the way through this." They just threw me in and let me do it. That was terrific! That was fantastic!

Duvall: That worked for you and worked well.

Snowbarger: Yeah it did.

Duvall: Well, you said, "Drag you off to the school for the blind. Does that mean that was not a place you were anxious to go to?

Snowbarger: I definitely did not want to go there.

Duvall: Did not want to leave home?

Snowbarger: Nope. Never did. Never did. I didn't feel like I belonged there and I landed at that school and just…I was in shock. This is a completely different culture. I don't belong to this. It was horrible. It was one of the most difficult things I ever did.

Duvall: What do you mean culture? It was a different culture.

Snowbarger: The people were different; they were from a different part of the state. They all talked different. I didn't know about the blind culture. It has kind of a unique characteristic. People have different ways of looking at things, internal to the blind culture than sighted people do. Different habits, different likes and dislikes, and of course being at school for the blind, I was also mixed in with several people who had other kinds of difficulties.

Duvall: Multiple disabilities?

Snowbarger: Yeah, yeah, lot of behavioral issues. That was new to me. That was a shock.

Duvall: That was not you?

Snowbarger: No it wasn't. My parents just opened the door. They just let me explore. Like for example, I remember having a toy fire truck that you could sit in and peddle. I had this thing…and most careful parents who want to make sure their child doesn't get injured would, probably, not even give them that. My parents let me have that. They didn't say, "Now be careful you'll go off the porch." They just gave it to me; "Here you go have fun." I did fall off the porch, but you know, I didn't die; I didn't get hurt bad and I didn't think of myself as a limited person. I thought of myself as just an ordinary person who could just do whatever he could do, you know. Incidents happen to people and it was liberating.

So yeah, I went to the school for the blind. Here there were experts who were thinking, "Oh, you're blind and you're different, you're special needs. We need to make sure you know how to do this and don't do that." That took awhile for me to figure that out, what they were trying to do there. I didn't like being identified as a special needs child. I wanted to be…I wanted to be like everybody else, you know, that was the hard part.

Duvall: One of the things I used to hear other former students talk about was that there was actually two strata of students at the school. There were the ones who had some vision and they could go off campus. They were the cheerleaders and whatever. Then there were those who were totally blind. They had more restrictions or were not encouraged as much.

Snowbarger: Yeah, this is true in part because, like an example would be if we're going to move a piano, for example. We need some students…we'll ask for a couple of sighted kids to help. The sighted kids were considered useful; they would get the part time jobs in the kitchen. They would just get more opportunity. The school didn't challenge the totally blind like I think they should have. I wish it had been a little different in that regard, but fortunately, I didn't need them to challenge me; I was up for that myself. So, I really didn't care.

But the other thing was there was stratification, and that was between this multiple handicapped group and those that were purely blind or visually impaired in some way. It took me until years later when I went to the public school to find out how different that was. If you were to

draw a graph of what I call manifest capability in each individual, you would have at the school for the blind, a very heavy distribution at the low end and then it kind of dipped down, way down, in the middle for the mediocre. There weren't too many of those. Then there were a bunch of sharp people up at the top; a bunch of these. So, you had kind of a V-shaped graph. At the public school, it was the other way around. You had a bunch of middle people and a few real idiots and a few bright people. So, you had just an upside down graph. It was more like an inverted "V." Way opposite.

Duvall: I see. No bell graph there.

Snowbarger: That was a shock to me as well. That's why I say the culture is radically different.

Duvall: How many kids were in your class?

Snowbarger: At Vinton?

Duvall: Yes, at Vinton.

Snowbarger: About 10.

Duvall: Were they the same 10 all the years you were there or did some of them come and go?

Snowbarger: Some came and went.

Duvall: And you ultimately became one of the ones that went?

Snowbarger: Yeah. I was one of the first to break out and barge into the public school even when they said it probably couldn't be done and I would probably be back. There were a couple who had gone before me, but the year that I went, which was fall of '69, a handful of us went and after that it was just an avalanche. Through the '70s, the population changed dramatically; more heavily toward this lower end multiple handicapped set and that continued throughout the life of that school, where it just went more and more to that group of people. Yeah, they had a visual disability but they had other more serious problems.

Duvall: You would have had to acquire some skills before you could survive in a public school.

Snowbarger: Yeah.

Duvall: I was thinking, can you explain the different kinds of Braille? I think of literary Braille right off the top, but you're profession is more into the computer, the mathematics and that kind of thing. Can you talk a little about that?

Snowbarger: Yeah, there are different Braille codes for that. That's changed over the years of course too. We use mostly a thing called Computer Braille here, which is where you can tell the difference between upper and lower case without a capital sign out in front. That is mostly for the sake of Braille printers and the mechanics of Re-freshable Braille, just makes it easier to do it that way. It is an eight-dot system rather than a six-dot.

Duvall: New York Point is an eight-dot system too, I think.

Snowbarger: Yeah, is it? We had New York Point in the library at Vinton, but I never learned to read that. It was…you know, really really old books. We were amazed to try to read them, but we couldn't make sense of them.

Duvall: I believe they lay on their side instead of stand tall.

Snowbarger: Yeah, that does seem like that. There were narrower lines. And then, there was a Braille called Moon Braille, way back in the 1800s, which is more like raised line drawings. It was sort of like raised print.

Duvall: Embossed shapes and things.

Snowbarger: Yeah, but it wasn't dots, it was a continuous line. It was neat, but it was not efficient I guess; it's probably hard to make. We didn't know how to read that either.

Duvall: What about…did you learn Nemeth, the math code?

Snowbarger: Yeah, that's right. I use that today.

Duvall: Did you use slate and stylus or Braille writer or the Taylor slate?

Snowbarger: Painfully, the slate and stylus at first. I don't use that at all today, at all. It's really tedious and slow, you know, but…there are so many more convenient ways to transcribe information and make notes now. But, we did

learn on the slate and of course, we used the Braille writers, the Perkins Brailler was the most popular. We all raced into the room to get the Perkins because they were the best.

Then we had the Hall Writer, which was an older form and then there was Lavender. The Lavenders were great because the way they were constructed you could reach across the table and kind of read what your buddy was writing just by looking at their cells popping up.

Duvall: I see. (Laughter)

Snowbarger: Lot of fun there. We had a good time at Vinton. I had a good time there once I kind of got used to it. It's odd to me that many of us hated that school while we were there and ended up with a fondness for the institution afterward. To this day, I don't fully understand that. Something psychologically obscure about that. But, I have fond memories of it and I hated every minute of it. That is so weird.

Duvall: Well, there is an organization that calls for reunions every year, isn't there?

Snowbarger: Yeah and a few people do go. Most don't seem to want to go. I went back to the reunion because I found that the whole process of being separated from my parents at an early age is just traumatizing, awful pain that surfaced many times in my life. Just crippling emotional pain over that; the separation from my parents mostly.

I went back many, many times. I would hang out…I wouldn't go to be with the people, I'd go to hang out in the back hallways and think and meditate and try to come to

terms with what had happened there, because I sort of felt that I had been, I guess I use the term earlier, dragged off. I felt I was compelled to go there against my will. My parents acquiesced because they didn't know, and the experts from the state came and said this is the best for your kid, and maybe it was because I did break out of the southern Iowa culture and get into some new things. I think it did help me. It was a mixed bag. I wanted to come to peaceful terms with all that. I feel like I finally have. At the age of 57, I've finally come to the point where I sort of realized my life was a hybrid.

Duvall: You know the idea of residential school and sending young children away from home for months at a time is common in the British culture. Anybody who could afford private school just sent their kids away and let somebody else raise them.

Snowbarger: That's how I kind of came to think of it, as that I was fortunate enough to go to a private school. (Laughter)

Duvall: Yes, I could see that.

Snowbarger: But on the other hand, you sort of feel locked away. The other side of it is, we take our blind kids and we hide them away in institutions so that they are not an inconvenience. My parents never gave me that impression. They thought of it as, "You're going there to get the best training possible. These people know how to give you opportunities we don't."

Duvall: Think about it, if you were a child, a blind child during the 2000s and your only opportunity to learn Braille and alternative skills and techniques, would be when the visiting Itinerant Teacher would come, maybe once a week. Would…

15:00

Snowbarger: Is that sufficient?

Duvall: Is it sufficient?

Snowbarger: I don't think so. Honestly, I don't think so. I've thought a lot about that. That school for the blind wasn't our deal. It certainly could have been better, but it had the opportunity to be great. One of the things that happens there is that you end up doing things that you didn't think you could do. Not because the staff challenged you to do it, but because Johnny down the hall was doing it. If he could do it, why not you? That was a wonderful thing. You'd go off, learn how, and push yourself.

Duvall: When the pond is small, you have a better chance to be the big fish.

Snowbarger: That's true, too. You get to be in the talent shows. You get to be the homecoming king and queen and in the plays and all of that. In fact, I did. At the school for the blind, there at the end I was actor of the year, you know. I thought I was good, for example, at dramatic presentation.

So, I go to the public school in 10th grade or actually 11th I started there and I think oh, this is something I could

do, you know. So, I try out for the play and I find that suddenly the value system is completely different. They want a visual presentation that I don't really know how to do. They are asking me to do gestures that seem unnatural to me. Suddenly, I'm incompetent at theatre. They agreed to let me in some contest play that nobody watched. By and large, I lost my belief in myself as a theatre person. On that stage, this isn't me any more. That's an example of the culture shift. You were a big fish and now you are a little minnow.

Duvall: I see. What about some of your course work? Now I know you went on to become an engineer. It is safe to assume you took chemistry, physics, calculus, geometry, and some of those higher levels of math and science.

Snowbarger: Yep, all along.

Duvall: Did you have the tools to be competitive in those academic classes?

Snowbarger: Um…well, at Vinton of course we did that kind of stuff. I was in that…we had a two-layer structure. I was in the kind of college prep layer and so we took a lot of that stuff. It was not an issue. At Ottumwa, where I went to the public school, I was in that same track, but ok, all the information is visual. Fortunately, I got quite a bit of material from the library in Des Moines.

I also had a great set of teachers that went the extra mile for me, and would make hand drawings and come up with other clever ways of presenting information. They

worked with me. They were handed a challenge and they stood up to it and rose to the occasion.

Duvall: This was still the early days for any assistive technology too.

Snowbarger: Oh yeah. We didn't have computers at all. We had the Braille writer. I had one class I took in Spanish, for example, and the teacher went so far as to learn Braille and transcribe Spanish lessons for me.

Duvall: Oh my goodness!

Snowbarger: Yep, I had some good people.

Duvall: You must have been quite charming.

Snowbarger: (Laughter) I don't know what it was but…as long as it worked out. I just had some good people.

Duvall: Yes, you did.

Snowbarger: There were people along the way that…I think there are two different kinds of sighted people. There are some that just naturally get it and are willing to extend extra effort, if need be, to heal the gap and there are those who think you're abnormal and weird and they're not going to relate to you no matter what you do. I did have some of those teachers, so I had a mix. I had one guy in college that was partially blind and not at all happy about it.

Duvall: One of your instructors?

Snowbarger: Yeah, I upset him just by existing. He tried to put stumbling blocks in my way.

Duvall: Out of sight, out of mind.

Snowbarger: Un-huh.

Duvall: You reminded him too much of what might be in his future.

Snowbarger: Yeah, exactly. So, I had a mix.

Duvall: Well tell me, how big was the Ottumwa public school?

Snowbarger: Huge! It was a…2,000 kids in the whole school and 600 kids in my class.

Duvall: Were you allowed to use a cane to travel between classes?

Snowbarger: Sure, but didn't always. That was an odd thing for me, too. During those days, I was not thinking realistic at all. I didn't want to be blind, even though I am totally blind. That's just ludicrous to even talk about that, but I felt emotionally like carrying the cane was a stigma. It spoke…it screamed loud, "I'm different than you!" I didn't want to have that symbol. So, I actually went around that school without a cane for several months. I did ok. Nothing bad happened and that's amazing to me. It's scary to think of today.

Somewhere in senior high school, we read this play called "Cyrano de Bergerac." Cyrano was a pretty cool guy. He carried a cane. It was a different kind of cane, of course, but I latched on to that. That's cool; that's a mark of distinction. It's not a stigma. Something just happened in my odd brain and I just latched onto it. I wanted to carry it. I've carried it ever since. It's weird what your brain will do. There is no rational defense to any of that. That's just the way it is. I didn't want to be blind.

Duvall: Very few people choose that.

Snowbarger: But later you come to the point, well hey this is what I am. This is what I am and I shouldn't feel bad about what I am. Any more than you feel bad about what you are. This is you, you know…I finally came to take pride in myself, and I don't know how you do that. It just…

Duvall: How do you teach that to other kids?

Snowbarger: No idea. I have no idea.

Duvall: The self-esteem business is tricky for any teenager, but add to that something that makes you different…

Snowbarger: When you want to be…so badly…want to be like everybody else. You call up and ask the girl out for a date and she kind of goes, "Oh gosh, gross. I don't want to be involved in you. Who would admire me for dating you?"

Duvall: I see. Now, is that a personal experience that you're sharing?

Snowbarger: (Laughter) Oh, sure! That kind of stuff carves you up, you know. It makes you hungry to take pride in yourself. It can make you overcompensate in other ways, which I'm sure I was guilty of at one point or another. That was a rough time.

Duvall: How did you go about choosing your career?

Snowbarger: Well, it kind of started with my love of radio, which is common among a lot of blind people. Sort of our television, you know. I loved radio. I wanted to be on the radio. I wanted to broadcast. I knew that you could, but I couldn't. I wanted to actually transmit on the radio around my neighborhood. So, I just screwed around in some random ways and somehow magically, in like the summer before my 4th grade year, I stumbled upon a way to do this. I was so excited. Oh, this is top notch.

Duvall: We need to tell people that you have a ham radio station in your basement, right?

Snowbarger: Yeah, right. I got a ham radio license later. This got me started on electronics, this desire to broadcast. I probably spent all of my childhood, from then on through my teenage years, trying to develop a better transmitter. I was in the basement. I should say that there were toys that you could buy that would just let you easily get on the radio and some people have those. My parents were cheap and they wouldn't buy me one, so I had to invent my own. So, I'm down in the basement every summer working with the electronics and starting to learn more and more about how

that worked and having a good time doing it. This beats watching TV; this is fun, this is creative, this is discovery. There are accomplishments and setbacks. It was all about remaining devoted to a goal and pursuing it no matter what. That got me into technology. Then my dad and I got into the ham radio thing to sort of layer on top of that.

Broadcasting was always my real desire. The electronics side of broadcasting was interesting, but the performance side was also interesting because when you're on the radio, you can sound cool and people can admire you but they don't know you're blind so none of that's an issue.

Duvall: Absolutely.

Snowbarger: Yeah. So hey, this is a way to recover some of those scars that you incur due to the way people treat you sometimes in other situations. My dad knew that I was headed toward a career in broadcasting and he had no respect for broadcasters, by and large, he figured they were a bunch of temporary carnival barker types and I would do a whole lot better if I went down a different path.

If I did the technology path, there was Lloyd Rassmussen, there was Curt Willowby, and these guys had already blazed the trail on into engineering. He knew about that. He reasoned that I would make a much better living if I went down the engineering path, than I would if I did the broadcasting thing. In retrospect, it's turned out to be true. I was sort of pushed down the engineering path and I really wanted to jump off several different times during the years, but I finally got my job and got a good income, more than I had ever made, I decided that wasn't so bad after all.

I never gave up on the broadcasting thing. There is a whole story around that, that has to do with…I guess when I was in Ottumwa High School, I fell in with a guy that had a job at the local radio station. He did a really good job. For a teenager, he was very good. I wasn't; but I thought I was, which is kind of an interesting thing. You can often think that you are, you know. I pursued it anyway.

I applied for a job there and the manager was not at all comfortable with blind people. He wasn't about to hire me. I remember him standing in the control room and lookin'…he wasn't even lookin' at me. He was lookin' at the board and he just says, "I suppose that in enough time you can maybe learn how to run this equipment. I don't know, but I don't think we want to chance it." Well, I was very upset. He wasn't going to hire me. He was not going to hire me no matter what.

My friend and I, we would get together after hours when the station signed off at midnight, and we would do our own radio shows on tape and I would run the board. I did everything. He selected records and we were a team. We were pretty entertaining. We would be popular today, but they weren't ready for us at that time. That was the best I could do.

At the time, hanging around got me nowhere with management. So, I went into college to do the engineering thing and making my dad happy. I was in college radio. They were okay with the blindness thing. No issue, hey, this is just student radio. If it doesn't work out it's no big deal.

Duvall: Now, this is ISU?

Snowbarger: Yep.

Duvall: Iowa State?

Snowbarger: Yep, '71–'75. I turned out to be a key player in that station, ultimately. I was on the Board of Directors and I was in charge of production. I hosted one of the more popular programs. Actually, here I am, I'm doing radio even though he said I couldn't do it [without True Vision]. That was fulfilling. I get out of college and of course, we can't find an engineering job, because they all need sighted people.

Duvall: Electrical Engineering, right?

Snowbarger: Yep. While I'm waiting, I re-approach the other radio station in town, that guy has a different attitude. He's perfectly willing to give me a try. He doesn't care how many hours I have to put in transcribing material. He's going to pay me for the amount of time he would normally pay somebody. My extra hours are my job. That was fine. I was willing to agree to that, 'cause I wanted the opportunity. I got to be in radio in my own home town and I was really happy about that, except that one day I realized I'm not making very much money at this.

Duvall: You're living at home.

Snowbarger: Yeah, I can't even afford to live by myself on these dollars. So, when I got the chance to go to work for the Iowa Commission for the Blind in '76, it was like doubling money. It wasn't as much fun by my estimation, but hey, money helps. My girlfriend lived in Des Moines, so

that was an extra benefit. I worked there for two years until my dad kept nagging me about the engineering thing and I kind of agreed with him. We wanted to do this.

30:00

Snowbarger: After I'd gone to all the work of getting a college degree, I wanted to capitalize on it. My dad was on the ham radio talking to some people he didn't know from Cedar Rapids and it turned out that this guy worked at Rockwell, which was Collins Radio at the time, and the guy off handedly mentioned that they had these EEO, Affirmative Action, I think they called that the time. They needed to seek handicap candidates for employment. My dad just happened to know one.

We connected up, and went and did that. I went and did the interview. It was clear to me from that interview that what Affirmative Action meant was they owed me the interview; they didn't owe me the job. Affirmative Action didn't mean they didn't have to hire me [Correction: had to hire me], it meant they had to seek candidates like me. They challenged me. They asked me tough questions.

Duvall: Do you remember what some of those were?

Snowbarger: They were electronics questions. We're talking, "Do you know your technology? Do you understand how to design? Do you know how a transistor works? What happens if you do this and you do that?" I had done pretty well in school. I was on top of that. I answered well.

Duvall: Even though you'd been away from it for a couple of years.

Snowbarger: Yep. I was playing with it in the basement still. I'd built some circuits; I actually had fabricated some circuit boards. My dad and I worked together on techniques for doing that. I had made some. I want Collins Radio to know that not only am I a guy who knows this stuff, I'm a guy who can do stuff. I think a lot of blind people stop at the knowing things stage and they don't…you got to get your hands dirty too. You got to be one who can actually make things happen. I wanted to demonstrate that I could do that.

So, I take this briefcase full of circuit boards…you know there're way simple compared to what they [Collins] do, but it exemplified the fact that I was capable, physically and mentally. I got that job. [But, when they offered me the job they were very up front with me that, while my interview was impressive, they were still not sure I could perform long-term. And so, they were going to hire me, but at a reduced starting salary. A lot of people would have balked at that. A lot of people would have declared that to be unfair, and claim discrimination and whatever. But, I wanted that job, and I wasn't going to argue about it. I knew you had to start somewhere, and I figured I could make lemon aid out of that just fine. I took it, and never regretted that decision.] That's how I got into this engineering thing. I've been employed in engineering, one form or another, since then. That was 1977.

Today I do kind of a mix of hardware and software. I have a lot of electronics here on my board. On my desk, a lot of odd wiring and bread boarding that I'm fully familiar with and have wired up myself. We are pretty physical here

as well as intellectual, I guess. So yeah, that's what I'm doing, but the radio thing is running in parallel with this. I still want to do broadcasting. I think I was out of broadcasting for probably 12–14 years. It's a piece I haven't done yet.

I moved around a little bit. I worked about…I worked at Collins, and then I worked in Texas for a couple of years. I needed to come back to Iowa and find a job here. There weren't that many to choose from here. I could go back to Rockwell, maybe. I wanted to be closer to Des Moines. This is a big career shift. Maybe its time for me to shift gears. I tried the broadcasting thing again. I couldn't get anybody to hire me. Not because that I was blind. I don't even think we even got to the point where they knew that.

When I would approach somebody for employment, I wouldn't tell them right away. I wouldn't say, "Hi, I'm blind and I'm looking for a job." I'd say, "Hi, I'm so-and-so and I do this. I want to apply for that position." If they are interested in me, then we get down to the details. I always kept it as a second level discussion. I would get them interested in me first. I'd get them convinced that I knew my stuff and then we'd talk about the logistics. Otherwise, they'd just throw you out…carte blanche´. I always did that. Every job I applied for I did that. The radio thing didn't take off in '86 [Correction: '84], '87 [Correction: '85], whenever that was, and I got this job here at Fisher in '86 [Correction: 1984].

Duvall: Did you know anyone who was already working here?

Snowbarger: No.

Duvall: What technique did you use?

Snowbarger: Well, I'm not sure that I remember. I think I just sent an application and resume to the company, because I knew it was here. They knew the kinds of things that I had done. There was some commonality there, so they brought me in…kind of a mixed bag. There were a lot of people here who were not very comfortable with blindness. There was one guy who was. He was pretty influential. He and I just hit it off. There was a lot we could talk about. We had worked a lot of the same data communications protocols and some of the same languages. We had technology in common and we just really latched up. I think he sold me [the rest of the company]. When I got here, I found out that there was a bunch of people who were not very impressed. They didn't think I was going to be able to do it and I really had a…I had a tough climb here for the first year. [Performing in the face of their doubts was difficult, and more than a little disconcerting; but eventually, I was able to turn the tide.]

I guess I ultimately went back to Texas with this group for two years. The group that went to Texas was the more urban kind of person. This company was sort of…it had two kinds of people, there were kind of provincial country type people who wanted to be yuppies, but they were sort of pretentious, they were very visual and visual people generally don't think much of us. They were a problem.

The ones that went to Texas were a cut above that. They were kind of your globally oriented, multi-cultural type people. They were more open-minded. They latched on to me good. We would go out and party together after work when we were here, and I made friends with those guys.

They were going to Texas and I had just left Texas, but I wasn't really done, I was kind of compelled to come back here for personal reasons. I didn't want to. So, I was jealous and I wanted to go back. I got myself assigned to go back there. And now, I got a significant assignment down there in Texas. I was able to carry that off.

Success is really the best justification for your position. If you deliver, they don't much care how you did it, they just want the product that you delivered and they're happy that you delivered it. I was delivering a product and so blindness disappeared as an issue; completely disappeared. Today it's a non-issue. There are things here that are done that I can't do, there are drawing and picture things that happen that I can't do. They don't need me to do that.

Duvall: They have somebody else that can do that.

Snowbarger: Yeah, that's right. I do the things I'm good at and it's terrific. The parallel path of the love of broadcasting, which had to do with being tenacious with a goal that kept happening, I was here in 1987 and I wanted to be in radio still. I wanted to do both these things. So, I called up to…oh, I wrote an application to the local radio station and I sent along an audio demo and said, "Here's what I can do." I thought I was really coming into my own. I had done some recording at home, my voice was maturing, and I was sounding better than I ever had, which is what I still think today but…sent in this resume…and they wrote me a letter. Well, you're good, but you're just not what we're looking for. I still can't believe I did this, but that somehow aggravated me, like you don't quite get it. You don't know how good I really am. I always felt I had a knack for

entertaining people. So, I called the manager up and told him who I was, I had gotten this letter and what it has said, and I said, "With all due respect, sir, I don't think you know what you're talking about."

Duvall: "I'm a very funny guy." (Laughter)

Snowbarger: (Laughter) And he laughed, he actually laughed. "All right, well fine, why don't you come in and we'll talk about it." So, I go in and I take some of my other stuff and I'm playing some of my audio material that I had created and he's cracking up. He's rolling on the floor laughing at it. Well, so ultimately he offers me a part-time job. I was going to be part of a morning team and I'm excited about that. I finally got…I finally got an offer that I think could lead someplace.

Duvall: Now you're working for Fisher, aren't you?

Snowbarger: Yeah, at the same time.

Duvall: And they want you to come work in the morning?

Snowbarger: Yeah.

Duvall: Okay.

Snowbarger: So, that was the problem. So, I negotiate with them about that, and they wouldn't go for it. We want 100% of your effort here. We don't want you burning yourself out on a second job. Well, this is the big money and I had financial obligations I had to meet. I had to stay here. It

was gratifying that I got the offer. That was enough for me somehow.

So, the guy says, "Maybe you could do just commercials for us;" so I did. I did a lot of commercials for them. It turned out, I was in there talking to him about some commercials one day we were working on and he mentions that they have an Advertising Director that he wanted me to talk to. He mentioned his name and it sounds awfully familiar. It turns out to be the manager of my local hometown radio station that refused to hire me in 1970. (Laughter)

Duvall: Oh, my. (Laughter)

Snowbarger: He came to be a real advocate in the end, he liked my work, and he was more open. He gave me lots of jobs. So, it came full circle. I finally got him to believe in me. I finally got to work in radio as much as I wanted to, and yet keep my good job. Today I still do commercials.

Duvall: Do you write the script?

Snowbarger: Yeah, yeah.

Duvall: And then deliver the message?

Snowbarger: I read it. I have recorded…I have also…I used to do music production and did advertising jingles. I had several playing around here. Since my hearing has decayed, music isn't as much fun, so I don't do that so much any more. I do read…I write them and read them, mix them and record them completely. I have several clients around the

country. I don't really promote that. Word of mouth is kind of starting to stack up. It could be something that I do after I retire from here. It's grown to the point where it could supplement my income pretty well. Because I kept after that, I refused…I just refused to just lie down, I guess stubbornness.

Duvall: Now, when I go to your website, I see references to the "Snowman." So, what is the "Snowman"?

Snowbarger: That was a persona that I created in the late '90s when I decided that I wanted to do my own talk show. There was a website that was streaming audio, and they had just started up. I knew those guys and they were friends and they needed program material. I decided, well, I'll create this show just to fill time for them. It was really all about the art of wasting time. The program kind of declared itself a waste of time, that if you really had anything better to do you should be doing it and not listening to this. (Laughter) It got popular. I had several hundred people listening to that. I made that for about two years.

Duvall: Was that like all over the country?

Snowbarger: Yeah, it was on the internet. People all over the world were tuning into that. A lot of good work got done. It was a pretty clever…I actually find it entertaining myself, to listen back on so….That was again developing a concept that I might one day pick up and carry forth. I would still like to do that. You know, when I get out of these pushing computers around thing, maybe we'll look into something like that.

Duvall: Now, I've heard a...I've heard from other blind people that you are of help to figuring out how to make the best of some of the adaptive technology; that you help people figure out how to make "JAWS" work and things like that?

Snowbarger: Yeah, I'm a "JAWS" user. There's a big...there's a script language behind "JAWS" that you can customize how it interacts with applications. I write those scripts. For a small handful of packages of applications that I use personally, I would develop these different scripts. I thought, you know, I'm all for helping people out but I'm also all for...I'm kind of a capitalist. I think you ought to get rewarded for your efforts.

45:00

Duvall: So, you have a product that you market.

Snowbarger: Un-huh. I sell those. I don't sell too many of those. There's a small handful at "Snowman Radio.com" that I sell. I'm not developing too much...I think all this stuff I've done lately has been free. There are a couple of major packages that were free. There's a lot of blind people who need that and don't have much money.

Duvall: That's the truth.

Snowbarger: On the other hand, I don't like people thinking that other people owe them a living or owe them a convenience. People should...I have also thought that I

needed to pay my way. If you can, you ought to. There are so many people that I run into that just expect stuff to be handed to them. I find that…I think that's a troubling attitude. It's not only morally offensive, but it will cause people to draw away from you if they think you're a freeloader. By asking people to pay a little bit, I'm sort of making a statement. I put in hours and hours and hours of work to make this work for you, so you shouldn't just expect that.

Duvall: Right, right. Um, what kind of assistive technology do you use for your work?

Snowbarger: Well, I'm heavy into, of course, "JAWS" and I'm heavy into Re-freshable Braille. I find that actually the computer talking tires my brain out. Sometimes I just turn the speech off, 'cause it just wears me out. I need to think about the problem and not hear a bunch of jabber. I use…I've got several Re-freshable Braille displays. I use an abacus.

Duvall: Good for you!

Snowbarger: Good old abacus. I still have one here. People think that's amazing.

Duvall: You might even have to explain what an abacus is.

Snowbarger: The Chinese developed this a very long time ago. You slide the beads up and down to represent numbers. You have thirteen columns here, yep, and four beads on the bottom and one bead on the top. That one on

the top has a value of five and these down here have the value of one, so five plus four is nine. That's zero through nine. Slide the beads toward the middle if you want them to be counted and away if you don't. I use this mostly for…I won't get into why I use it…it has to do with binary-digits rather than adding up numbers to sort of visualize bit patterns inside my program. I will use this to set up patterns and think about them. You kind of go off and get all cerebral and non-verbal when you think like that. I use that.

I still use the Perkins Brailler, from time to time, but mostly I'm in computer-land. I have a Braille printer there, an old Romeo, which I sometimes print out stuff if I need to stare at it, think about it, and want to see more than one line at a time. Re-freshable Braille is just one line, so you've got to be moving it up-and-down, up-and-down with the arrow keys if you want to think about a large section of text. Printing it out in Braille paper is the easiest way to do that.

(Jim is demonstrating how the gadgets work as he is talking.)

Snowbarger: I have a few other gadgets around here…custom gadgets we have made that allow me to measure electrical voltage and current, air pressure, I guess that's all that does. Fisher Technicians built this box. I wrote the software that went inside it. It makes an audio tone, which varies in pitch as the thing you're measuring changes. As the air pressure goes up and down, you can hear this audio tone change in pitch and there are two little oscillators in there. One of them is controlled by a knob that you turn. As you turn the knob, the pitch goes up-and-down. The other oscillator is controlled by the thing you're

measuring. You turn the two oscillators on at once, you adjust the knob until the pitches are identical and then you read off the pointer of the knob onto a little raised dot scale that I have there. That allows you to measure it. It's really old school, like 1970s technology.

Duvall: But it works.

Snowbarger: It has some very nice advantages. You can hear things change rapidly, in real time, so you can detect that there is noise or that your signal is unstable in a way that a digital measurement won't show you. It's actually better in a lot of ways.

(Jim is putting away the gadgets.)

Snowbarger: Go ahead; you got another question?

Duvall: I was going to ask you, do you ever use like the…is it the "iPhone" now that is supposed to have adaptations that allow blind people to use some of the extra phone features?

Snowbarger: I do not. Mostly, because my lifestyle is not mobile enough to warrant a cell phone, really. I don't even have one. I'm not enamored with the little "wizzy" new technology that works half the time. That stuff just leaves me cold. It might be if I had a different lifestyle, that I was more mobile, I'd want one; but today I don't.

Duvall: So like the GPS systems that blind people can use and often have in their phones and stuff, that isn't anything you're longing to use?

Snowbarger: Nope. I think it's great that it exists. It's a wonderful thing. If I were traveling around, I would have one. As it is, my life is a pretty small circle. I go from here to home. I'm here, I'm there. I don't communicate with that many people really, so it just doesn't have a place in my life.

Duvall: Well, it's interesting to see how some people incorporate technology into their personal life. I was sitting at a big table of blind people. The husband called the wife. She had come by a different method of transportation to the restaurant and so he was giving her instructions as to where we were seated. I thought, "Well, you know, we used to wait for our people at the door, now we go ahead and get ourselves seated and just call them on the phone."

Snowbarger: Yep. "Here are my coordinates." (Laughter)

Duvall: Yes. (Laughter)

Snowbarger: It's a great thing; a lot of terrific possibilities there.

Duvall: I think of all the years that we used to go to the National conventions and you know, we'd just be across the street from each other, but you might as well be on the other side of the country because we had no way of gaining contact with each other.

Snowbarger: Yeah. Another good one is the bar code scanner that can identify products and even get you to cooking directions. I would have one of those if I lived alone. Being married makes you kind of soft and lazy.

Duvall: I see.

Snowbarger: I'm married to a sighted person so I get kind of…

Duvall: You get transportation and…

Snowbarger: Yep. I've had single episodes in my life, so I was able to do that, but my goodness, this stuff that we have now would make it so much easier than it was when I was single in the '80s. If I were single again, I would have to re-acquire all of this. It's a scary prospect, but it could be done. Thank goodness those things are there, that you can do; on-line banking, you can determine where you are, you can find out if the cab driver is taking you for a long route. All kinds of things.

Duvall: That's right. Well, we are getting close to the end here. I want to ask you what you do for fun.

Snowbarger: This is fun!

Duvall: Talking?

Snowbarger: Yeah, all of this. Work is actually kind of fun. My commercial production thing is fun, even though I get

paid for those things. I really like to have fun at the things I get paid for; that's a good thing.

Beyond that, I have a nice big dog I love to hang around with. I love to hang around with my wife and talk. She likes my jokes. I just hang out in my little place in the country. We have a little three acre spread with kind of an old farmstead. Way, way off the beaten path. It is very peaceful. Nice place to just…after I work hard here and work hard in the studio, it feels good to just sit and idly muse.

Duvall: I see.

Snowbarger: I read a little bit, but not too much. I go in and out of phases of reading. Right now, I don't have much time to read. The time I am not active, just being idle, talking with myself, and thinking about things, I think about things a lot. I think that's important. It's important to kind of mentally take stock of yourself, what you believe and why you believe it. Think about how things work, you know, how…why things are the way they are, like politics is kind of a hobby of mine. I think about that. I think about cultural things. I try to figure out what's happening to society and how it can be steered and how it can be prevented from decaying like it seems that it is. Those things are interesting to me.

I don't travel; I'm not interested in hanging out with lots of people. I'm really kind of a loner. I enjoy that. It's not a lonely, loneliness; it's a "thank God" moment. (Laughter)

Duvall: (Laughter) Well, I understand that introverts are able to fill their soul with energy by being alone and have

creative thoughts. I refer to it as moving furniture. I move a lot of furniture when I'm just sittin' in my chair and thinking about it.

Snowbarger: Yeah, absolutely.

Duvall: Then when I'm done thinking about it, I just get up and do it.

Snowbarger: You've imagined it and you can change it and not like it and change it back with no effort. It's a wonderful thing. I'm like that very much.

Duvall: Before we conclude this though, I would like to ask you if you…I consider you a very successful blind guy. If you were asked to provide some advice or suggestions to young blind people today, what kind of suggestions, what kind of advice would you give them?

Snowbarger: Well, it's going to take me a minute here while I think about that.

Duvall: That's alright.

Snowbarger: I don't want to sound like the guy who knows everything and who's done everything right, because I don't and I haven't. I could have done better. I haven't always done everything that I might suggest here.

I think when you're in school, if you're a kid in school, take that seriously. Don't just go through it. Really, try to get something out of it. Try to understand why things are the way they are. Dig in behind the scenes; push back

against the things your teachers teach. Challenge what they shove at you, make sure you know why that's that way. Because knowing the why of things helps you figure out how to change it if you need to, as opposed to just accepting it.

The other thing is be the best you can be at it. Whatever it is that you decide you're going to do, seek it, excellence at that. The fact of the matter is, as a blind person you have a lot of things against you, being just sort of mediocre isn't good enough. You'll be better than you thought you could possibly be, if you push, if you challenge yourself, so you can go into the work place strong and substantial.

There's a fake expertise in the world. There are a lot of people talking a good line, but when you get right down to it, they don't really get it. Make sure you get it. Having sighted people think you're smarter than they are is not such a bad thing. It can help. You have to wrap that smartness in a nice cozy, friendly layer of social acceptability. They got to like you too. You've got to put them at ease. Some people are harder to put at ease than others. Some can't be put at ease no matter what. [When somebody refuses to believe in you, despite the evidence, I say hey, kick the dust off of your shoes and move on. Don't buy their delusions, stay true to your own faith, and seek a new opportunity. There is a better place waiting for you, perhaps just around the corner. If you want to change the world, then seek the people who don't understand blindness, and who don't get it, and try to educate them. But, you'll do better personally if you seek the people who do get it, and work with people who are naturally inclined to believe in you. When I think of how well things have gone for me, I realize that it wasn't all just due to my own efforts. It couldn't have happened without

certain key people who opened doors, paved the way, and who helped me negotiate some of the turns. They did it because they saw normalcy in me, and even something more, and they felt like enabling it. Watch for people like that; people who get it. They do come along. Your job is to not miss them.]

When people talk to you about blind mannerisms, take that seriously. Repress those; repress the urge to engage in those, because those isolate you from sighted people.

1:00:00

Snowbarger: Those make sighted people not want to hire you. They make them think of you as different. If you clear that away and make yourself socially presentable, they're more likely to believe that you'll be responsible and that you'll actually do a good job for them.

You've got to convince them that it's to their advantage to hire you, you know, you don't want them to hire you because they feel sorry for you, because they think they should, because they've got a mandate to it. You want them to hire you because they think it's in their best interest to do that. Be as normal as you can be, without loosing track of who you are.

So that...and then went you get on the job, again go the extra mile. Find extra ways to be valuable, because there are ways that you can't be valuable. You're not as flexible as the sighted person, typically, so when you find things that you can do, hop up to the plate and do them. Be positive, be constructive, make them aware that you are an asset. Yeah? So, work hard, challenge yourself, seek excellence.

Duvall: Be all that you can be.

Snowbarger: Absolutely.

Duvall: All right. Well, thank you for your time and for your stories. Is there any other remarks that you would like to make for posterity?

Snowbarger: (Laughter) I don't know. I'll think of it tonight.

Duvall: All right. In that case, Jim, I want to thank you very much. We will provide you with probably an electronic copy of a transcript of our interview and you have an opportunity to review that and make any comments or deletions that you feel necessary.

Snowbarger: I probably won't. I'll probably let it fly.

Duvall: All right. If we don't hear from you, we'll go with it as is. Thank you.

1:02:15
(End of Recording)

Deb Brix
February 18, 2011